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ABSTRACT

This brochure for parents of gifted adolescents discusses strategies to use to support the interests of their children and how to recognize and extend their children's talents. Parents are urged to: (1) increase their knowledge about the child's area of interest; (2) discuss the child's present and future degree of involvement; (3) encourage the child to develop new interests by participating in a variety of activities; (4) teach the child to explore ideas early and throughout life; (5) encourage the child to experience the value and love of learning; and (6) understand what can be done to help their child. Questions are provided that parents may want to discuss with their son or daughter for developing a particular talent and strategies are included for helping children with multiple talents. (CR)

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ED 427 485

What Parents Need To Know about... Recognizing and Encouraging Interests, Strengths, and Talents of Gifted Adolescents.

Marcia A. B. Delcourt

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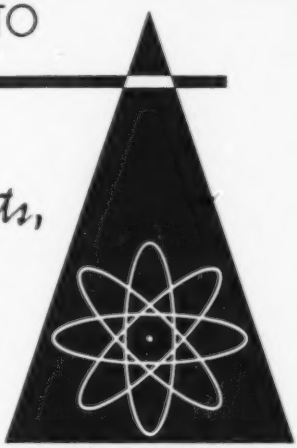
WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT . . .

Recognizing and Encouraging Interests, Strengths, and Talents of Gifted Adolescents



Marcia A. B. Delcourt

Adolescence is an important time for our children because they are learning to become independent thinkers and to make decisions about what they want to do in the future. This brochure provides some responses to questions about how to support the interests of gifted adolescents, and how to recognize and extend their talents.

Gifted Adolescents

How can I be supportive of my son's or daughter's interests?

One of the best ways to be supportive of your teen is to find out what his or her interest is and learn more about the topic yourself. Next, be patient with your child regarding this interest and ask what is enjoyed about the topic. In general, when parents are knowledgeable about and

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interested in their children's performance *both in and out of school*, students perceive their parents as being supportive (Delcourt, 1993). If, for example, your adolescent is a member of a chess club and requires transportation to after school practices and week-end meets, you certainly know at least one of his or her interests. You are supportive by taking your turn in the car pool and you may even be helping to organize the local tournaments. You cannot help but know that this is an interest of your teenager's, but how intense is this interest? That is one thing you should observe and discuss. Find out what motivates your son or daughter to participate in this pursuit:

- Is this viewed as a good way to socialize?
- Does your teen find the competition exhilarating?
- Does he or she say, "I have finally found something that I am really good at doing"?
- Will this interest lead to the long-term development of a particular talent?

Any one or all four questions may produce a positive response from your adolescent. The responses to these questions also indicate the amount of commitment your son or daughter is willing to make concerning this interest and the degree of support he or she will need. How is an interest different from a strength? When an adolescent displays commitment to a topic, it is often because he or she has a strength in an area related to that topic. For example, an interest in chess includes a strength in memory, logic, and prediction. A chess player understands how to plan tactics and visualize subsequent moves. In another example, someone who participates in speed skating on a regular basis has physical strength and endurance as well as bodily-kinesthetic ability. A speed skater moves quickly, displays skill, balance, and knows when and how to pass other skaters. Even when your teenager has an interest that may not be a strength of yours, you can support your son or daughter by:

- increasing your knowledge about his or her area of interest.
- discussing his or her present and future degree of involvement.
- encouraging him or her to develop new interests by participating in a variety of activities.
- exploring ideas early and throughout life.
- experiencing the value and love of learning.
- understanding what you can do to help. For example, an interest in chemistry, poetry, or rock music might involve finding a scientist who could be a mentor or pen-pal, locating poetry journals that encourage student submissions, or arranging for a piano teacher through your school or community.

When your son or daughter becomes very interested in a topic, often he or she will also develop expertise in many of its facets, such as the history of the topic, knowledge about others who participate in the activity, the appropriate equipment needed to move to more advanced levels within the activity, and how to become better skilled in this particular area of interest. Some teens will become local experts in their selected topic and will probably need your assistance to further develop their talent.

What is a talent and how can it be developed?

When people hear the word "talent," they often think of an artistic area of expression such as drawing or playing a musical instrument. We also refer to people as being talented athletes or talented in mathematics. Most experts agree that talent implies some natural ability based on an area of strength. Both the child's personality and the types of opportunities available in the environment over a period of time play a large role in the development of a talent (Bloom, 1985; Sosniak, 1997).

An individual may be talented in one or several areas. If a student has a talent, he or she will be performing above average in that area as compared to his or her same age peers, but this same student might not be above average in other areas of endeavor. For example, a student talented in science could be performing at grade level in a foreign language class. On the other hand, talent in one area does not preclude talent in another field. Someone can be a capable mathematician *and* visual artist.

How might talent be displayed? A tenth grader, who is gifted in science, attends an honors section for a course in physics. She experiments with the mathematical equations used to calculate changes in black holes and then shares this information via the Internet with physicists in other parts of the world. This talent for logical and insightful thinking is recognized and validated by having scientists provide constructive feedback to the student, helping her obtain new knowledge and skills as well as providing her with an outlet for synthesizing information about this topic. Several Internet sites provide opportunities to "ask the experts." Two such sites for science are http://www pitsco.com and the *Scientific American* site http://www.sciam.com.

In another example, a talented sixth grade writer has produced an extensive book every year since the second grade. His vocabulary is beyond that of many high school students and, of course, he is an avid reader. His literary tastes are varied and include poetry, fantasy, science fiction, as well as biographies. He has begun to illustrate his works and is presently featuring a child inventor in his new trilogy. His school program is adapted

to include time for his writing, resulting in his having already published two short stories for a children's magazine.

Both of these students have found ways to develop their skills and to express themselves. They have been working in their respective talent areas for several years. Indeed, talent development takes time, even for students who have an obvious inclination for a particular area. In general, talent development involves ability, interest, motivation, and a supportive environment. A moderate balance among these variables is necessary for the talent to unfold and progress. If, for example, a child shows immense interest and ability in a particular area but is not motivated to practice the skills that would develop his or her ability, the talent can be stunted and may even extinguish. A student who plays the piano quite readily, easily reads music, displays finger dexterity, and has the ability to memorize compositions, will not progress with this musical ability without consistent practice.

In school, the development of academic talent means that an educational program needs to have the flexibility to allow your son or daughter to progress at a rate commensurate with his or her ability. Teachers need to be well versed in their content and have options for middle or high school students that include: appropriate enrichment activities; quality mentors from the school or local community (Reilly, 1992); placement in advanced courses through acceleration or programs such as honors or AP (Advanced Placement) classes; elimination of mastered curriculum through curriculum compacting (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992); credit for courses taken at local colleges or universities; and opportunities for early graduation from high school.

At some point, you and your son or daughter have to decide upon the long-term focus for developing a particular talent. You may want to discuss the following questions:

- *Is the talent pursued for enjoyment (intellectual, emotional, aesthetic)?*
  If a talent area is not enjoyed, it will be difficult to maintain interest and commitment over an extended period of time. Developing a talent can be challenging, but should also be fun.

- *Does the talent require advanced training with a specialized instructor?*
  Find out if your school or local community has opportunities to provide advanced training in your son's or daughter's talent area. Perhaps, your school or library can assist you in locating an instructor.

- *How will the talent development be financed?*
  Lessons and equipment can be expensive. You can find out about the costs by locating individuals, clubs, newsletters, or Internet sites related to the activity. There may also be scholarship funds available through school or community groups.

- *Are specific activities such as competitions needed to validate and advance within the talent area?*
  Do you and your son or daughter want to be involved in competitions or do you want to practice the talent without the competitive factor? You have to discuss the options within the particular talent area and the pros and cons of this. Some skills such as athletics are most typically organized through competitive events, while other talents such as song writing can be pursued individually with a song being submitted for review or publication whenever the artist chooses.

- *How far do you want to travel to pursue this talent?*
  You can decide that you will only participate in activities available in your local community or region. On an occasional basis, you may choose to attend other activities requiring travel over greater distances. For example, a chess organization that is part of the USCF (United States Chess Federation http://www.uschess.org) could meet weekly for practice and monthly for tournaments within your school district. This might be within your schedule. You will have to decide along with your son or daughter whether or not a more extensive commitment is desirable regarding your time and the distance you can travel.

- *Is this talent area the foundation of a career?*
  Find out more information from someone who does have a career in this area. Talk to that individual about a variety of issues, such as how interest in the topic was first noted, where he or she went to school, and what he or she likes about the career. If the talent area is not going to be a career, discuss areas of strength that can lead to a career.

- *Does the development of the talent fit into your son's or daughter's other academic and social plans? Are there competing interests or talent areas limiting the time allowed to pursue this area?*
  Since talent development takes time, you and your son or daughter should look closely at a weekly or monthly schedule to see how much time can be reserved for the talent area while maintaining other commitments. Whether the talent area is pursued as part of school coursework as in an honors or AP class or as an after school program, an agreeable schedule among all commitments will help your teen develop a reasonable balance among his or her intellectual, social, and emotional needs.

How can I help my son or daughter who has multiple talents?

As with the development of a single talent, students with multiple talents need to make choices about what goals they want to achieve regarding the talent area. For an adolescent, career plans need to be considered and the decisions are not always easy. For instance, what should be the career focus for the following student? A twelfth grader is on the honor role for both science and English, has placed first in the statewide science fair, received a blue ribbon in an essay writing contest, and has played the piano to audiences for the past five years.

It seems easy to say, "We should all have such problems"! This is indeed a dilemma because it is difficult to know where one's energies should be focused. With multiple talents, some students do what others tell them to do and never find out what topic is most satisfying as a career. Other students become extremely frustrated or even depressed, resulting in their accomplishing far fewer of their goals. Experts say that having multiple talents or "multipotentiality" is a true challenge when the interest, motivation, ability, and opportunity focused on two or more talent areas are roughly equal (Rysiew, Shore, & Carson, 1994). In other words, if this twelfth grader has equal interest, motivation, and ability regarding science, writing, and music, as well as the opportunities to pursue all three areas, it will be more difficult to make a decision for a career path. Inability to make a career decision is called "overchoice syndrome" (Rysiew, Shore, & Carson, 1994). The questions in the previous section will also assist a student who is trying to decide upon a primary focus for a talent area.

As a student seriously assesses his or her interest, motivation, and opportunity to pursue multiple talent areas, the focus on one talent rather than another may evolve naturally. The following examples represent three possible choices for the twelfth grader described earlier. This student could become:

- a scientist who prefers scientific writing, but also enjoys both poetry and playing the piano.
- a writer specializing in investigations of scientific phenomena as well as a reporter of musical events.
- a musician who writes about music theory and keeps abreast of scientific findings.

Students are able to make more informed decisions about developing their talents and potential careers when these recommendations by Rysiew, Shore, and Leeb (in press) are followed:

- Exploration of potential careers should begin in elementary school.
- Students should first select general areas of interest and then focus on more specific career options.
- Students should learn as much as possible about prospective careers by gathering information through avenues such as visits to work sites, interviews with people who engage in the career of interest, and visits to college classes.
- Students should realize that making a career choice is an ongoing process that can be changed.
- Talents can be expressed in a variety of ways, not only in one's job but in one's hobbies.

What do students learn from developing their talents?

A study of highly talented secondary school students found that as these individuals pursued their talent areas over at least a four-year period, they realized that they were learning much about themselves from their experiences. When asked what they had learned from projects such as completing science experiments, writing grants, participating in creative competitions, and composing essays, students said that their participation in their projects resulted in:

- increased interest and task commitment.
- improvements in the quality of their pursuits.
- the ability to get more ideas for developing projects related to their talents.
- better organizational strategies.
- the selection of more challenging activities used to express their talents.
- the ability to accept criticism more realistically.
- the development of skills in research, writing, communications, and technologies.
- improved patience, self-assurance, responsibility, attitudes toward learning, independence, and enjoyment of learning.
- the exploration of potential careers. (Delcourt, 1993, 1994)

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